

EXPLORING THE UNIVERSITY SUPPORT NETWORKS OF FIRST-GENERATION
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

by

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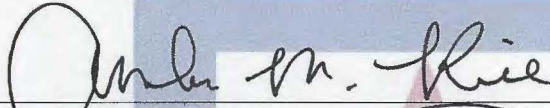
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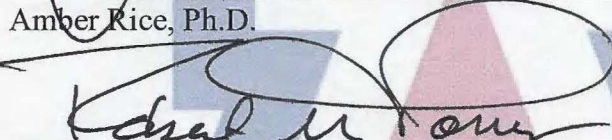
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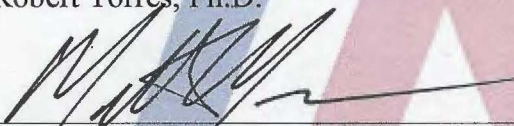
As members of the Master's Committee, we certify that we have read the thesis prepared by Ericka Encinas, titled Exploring the University Support Networks of First-Generation Undergraduate Students and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Master's Degree.


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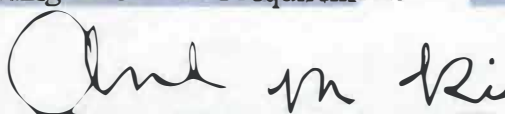
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Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the thesis to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this thesis prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the Master's requirement. 


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Abstract

The central research questions that guided this study were: how does the mentor/mentee relationship between academic advisors and first-generation college students develop within an academic success course; how does the mentor/mentee relationship between peer mentors and first-generation college students develop within an academic success course? This research was conducted utilizing a case-study approach with a single academic success course for students on academic probation serving as the case. Three academic advisors teaching the course, four peer mentors meeting with students outside of class, and three students taking the course were interviewed. The case was selected to explore in depth the complex system of support first-generation college students receive at the university level. The two overarching themes that emerged from the data were: the process of developing an emotional connection to create a relationship and utilizing a holistic approach to support students. More specifically, finding common ground, being relatable to students, showing that you care for students as individuals, and fostering openness and informality in relationships were the components identified by participants to foster emotional connection. The data also revealed that peer mentors and advisors were initiating accountability with their students, making intentional referrals for students to other campus resources, and the underlying motivation to serve in these two roles came from an intrinsic desire to give back. Recommendations included directors of advising and student retention administrations defining the roles of advisors in regard to student emotional support, compensating them for their work, and increase training for all university staff and faculty on how to create these impactful relationships with students.

Keywords: First-generation College Student, Advising, Peer Mentor, University Support Networks

Introduction

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2018), first-generation college students (i.e. students whose parents have not obtained a bachelor's degree from a 4-year university) represent one third of all U.S. undergraduates attending college. Past research has revealed that first-generation college students face unique challenges in their pursuit of higher education, particularly when compared to traditional students (McConnell, 2000; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Traditional students are students that have at least one parent who has completed a four-year degree in the United States (McConnell, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Of these two groups, first-generation college students are more likely to have lower educational aspirations, take fewer credits, work off campus, and take longer to complete their degrees (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). Additionally, first-generation college student support networks are often without direct familial first-hand knowledge of the higher education process. This can lead to misunderstandings of institution and/or faculty expectations for students, the process of degree completion and services available to all students who need assistance.

A large body of the literature focuses on either primary or extended family support (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; McConnell, 2000; Schneider & Ward, 2003) and peer support for first-generation college students (McConnell, 2000; Schneider & Ward, 2003). Families can provide emotional support and motivation for students pursuing higher education (Gofen, 2009; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; McConnell, 2000; Schneider & Ward, 2003, Torres, 2004). Peers can provide academic information, emotional support, and sense of belonging at the university (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; McConnell, 2000; Schneider & Ward, 2003; Yazedijan,

Purswell, Sevin, & Toews, 2007). Despite the importance of support for student success documented in the literature and the identified knowledge gap of familial support systems for first generation college students, there has been little research conducted to understand the support that is provided within the system of higher education.

Currently, there is a lack of understanding in the literature about the support that is available to first-generation students at the institutional level. This is significant, because contact with university faculty and staff can enhance student development and academic success for all college students (Kim & Sax, 2009; Strauss & Terenzini, 2007; Thompson, 2001). Faculty interactions are associated with psychosocial and academic outcomes (Fielstein, 1987; Komarraju, Musulkin & Bhattacharya, 2010). Informal interactions with faculty can have a positive effect on students, specifically seeing the relevance between academics and desired career paths, seeing course work as more enjoyable, and increasing a student's desire to reach a higher level of understanding in content (Komarraju, Musulkin & Bhattacharya, 2010).

As higher education has evolved, academic advisors have become the institutional authority tasked with mentoring all students in regard to academic progress and career goals (Brown & Rivas, 1994; Fielstein, 1989; Smith & Allen, 2006; Winston & Sandor, 1984). Academic advising can provide significant support to first-generation college students, because their familial and peer support systems often lack the institutional knowledge that would help them navigate the higher education system (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; McConnell, 2000; Schneider & Ward, 2003). Swecker, Fifolt, and Searby (2013) examined the role academic advising appointments played in first-generation student retention. The researchers uncovered a significant positive relationship between the number of meetings these students had with their academic advisor and retention to the following semester (Swecker et al., 2013). These findings

highlight the important role advisors serve in for these students and validates advising appointments as a formal institutional structure that constantly connects students to the university.

Although academic advising can aid in retaining this at-risk student population (Glennen & Baxley, 1985; Vander Schee, 2007), many incoming first-generation college students do not see academic advisors as an authority (Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis & Ruder, 2006). Therefore, these students do not utilize academic advisors as a resource and do not reach out for support until they experience a negative consequence (e.g. an academic hold, academic probation, etc.) Using a case study approach, my research focused on the mentor/mentee relationship that forms between academic advisors, peer mentors, and first-generation college students. Specifically, I sought to identify the types of support (e.g. academic, career aspiration, emotional, social, etc.) that students, peer mentors, and advisors identify within a mentor/mentee relationship and the key characteristics that make this relationship effective.

This research study focuses on the relationship formed with academic advisors because they interact with students on a regular basis about required course work and career exploration. They are the individuals who usually serve as the first point of contact at the university and have continued interaction with students throughout their academic career. Additionally, they are the personnel that are responsible for connecting students to university services which are particularly beneficial for first-generation college students. These support services can supplement students' lack of institutional knowledge and increase their likelihood of academic success (Glennen & Baxley, 1985; Thayer, 2000; Vander Schee, 2007).

Another support system being utilized in higher education are peer mentoring programs for first year and/or at-risk students. Peer mentoring programs have been shown to increase

student persistence and retention (Asbee & Woodall, 2000; Bank, Slavings, & Biddle, 1990; Hughes & Fahy, 2009; Pascarella, 1980). Students can receive different types of support from peer mentors as compared to advisors (Bank, Slavings, & Biddle, 1990; Pascarella, 1980), because of the different dynamic within these relationships (Collins, Swanson & Watkins, 2014; Kram, 1985). Students can receive psychosocial and career development support (Kram & Lynn, 2017; Terrion & Leonard, 2007) and feelings of belonging at the institution through these peer mentor relationships. As a peer mentor, students can fulfill different roles for students including: a trusted friend, learning coach, and student advocate (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). By serving in these roles, peer mentors are instrumental in providing holistic support for students on an academic, career, and personal level.

Purpose and Need for the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide a greater understanding of the relationships that first-generation college students develop with academic advisors and peer mentors at the university level within a southwestern land grant university and a college of agriculture. More specifically, I focused on the relationship that forms between this student population, the academic advisors teaching, and the peer mentors assisting with an academic success course in the college of agriculture. Academic advisors, peer mentors, and the first-generation college students were interviewed to understand how each group defines the relationship and the key characteristics that make the relationship effective.

The primary goal of this research study is to add to the knowledge of first-generation college students' support systems. By mapping out each participant's university support system, I explored the nuances of these relationships, how they develop, and the key factors students and advisors identify within the relationship and patterns across individuals that make the

relationship effective. The greatest area of contribution is recommendations for academic advisors that don't have experience working with this particular student population. Although informal advising and mentoring has a history in higher education (Pascarella, 1980), formal academic advising is still an emergent profession. NACADA, the first professional association that was focused on academic advising and the individuals who serve in these roles, was founded in 1979 (Beatty, 1991; Grites & Gordon, 2009). Because the professional association is relatively new, one of the goals of this study is to give concrete suggestions to advisors and universities on factors first-generation students identify as important to their academic success and development.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this project were:

1. How does the mentor/mentee relationship between academic advisors and first-generation college students develop within an academic success course?
 - a. What support is provided to first-generation college students through this relationship?
 - b. What impact (if any) does this relationship have on student academic success?
2. How does the mentor/mentee relationship between peer mentors and first-generation college students develop within an academic success course?
 - a. What support is provided to first-generation college students through this relationship?
 - b. What impact (if any) does this relationship have on student academic success?

Conceptual Framework

To guide my research, I used Moll's, Amanti's, Neff's and Gonzalez's (1992) Funds of Knowledge framework to identify the individuals my participants list within their social support

system at the university level and to better understand the types of support students receive from these individuals. The Funds of Knowledge framework highlights the interconnected social system that promotes the exchange of knowledge, experiential advice and skills (Moll et al, 1992). This framework was designed under the assumption that households and communities contribute relevant and useful knowledge and skills to its members and to eliminate the idea that students who grow up in Latino households with little knowledge about the school system were starting at a deficit (Moll et al, 1992). Instead the model embraced these students' support systems and identified the strengths that these individuals could provide, including experiential advice, real world knowledge, and emotional support (Moll et. al, 1992). See Figure 1 for an example of the support system for a first-generation college student at the university level through a Funds of Knowledge lens.

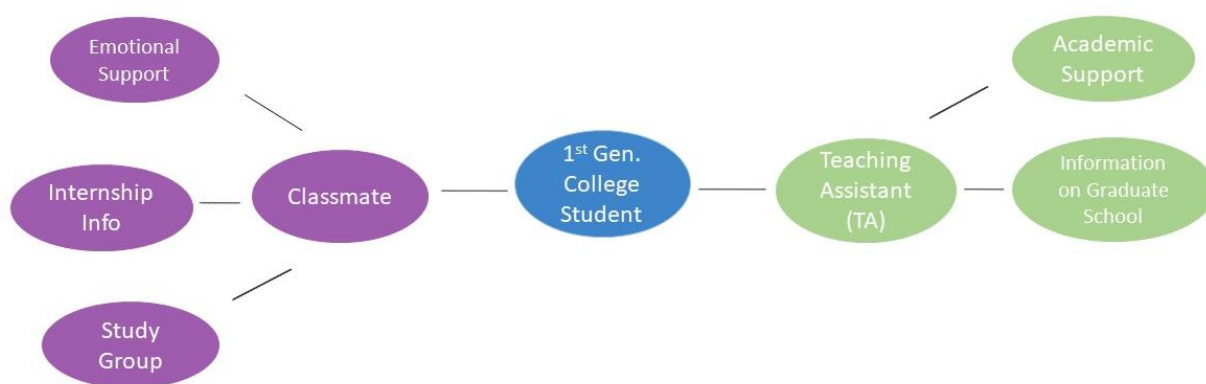


Figure 1. Example Fund of Knowledge Framework for a First-Generation College Student

In the example, the teaching assistant and fellow classmate serve as funds of knowledge. The teaching assistant provides the first-generation student with academic support for the course he or she is teaching and information on graduate school i.e. structure and application process.

The teaching assistant provides expertise and experiential advice that a student would most likely not be able to access within their peer or familial support systems. Another person who serves as a fund of knowledge for the first-generation college student is their classmate. The classmate provides emotional support, information on internships, and a study group for college courses. The first-generation college student can work with and exchange study strategies with this classmate as well as share the day to day responsibilities and struggles of being a college student. Again, the classmate provides emotional and academic support that the student would most likely not be able to access from their professional or familial support systems. To serve as a fund of knowledge, these individuals need to have a relationship with the first-generation college student. The bi-directional arrows demonstrate this relationship is reciprocal and the first-generation college student not only accesses support but is able to provide it as well in a different context.

A significant amount of research on the support systems of first-generation college students are framed from a social and/or cultural capital perspective (Dumais & Ward, 2009). This lens highlights the different barriers and power dynamics these students face in comparison to their traditional peers when pursuing higher education. Unfortunately, it excludes the positive attributes that first-generation college students have been shown to possess. For example, possessing the ability to perform academically just as well as traditional students (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996) and being twice as likely to persist as their peers at degree completion (Somer, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004).

The Funds of Knowledge framework has been used in K-12 educational programs (Hedges, Cullen & Jordan, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Turner & Drake, 2015), as a way to develop a culturally sensitive curriculum (Rodriguez, 2013), and explain the

education experiences and opportunities of diverse and underrepresented students (Kiyama, 2010; Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt & Moll, 2011). Academic advisors can be considered funds of knowledge in the same way that parents are considered funds of knowledge in Moll's (1992) original theory. Like parents, academic advisors and peer mentors are the individuals at the university assigned to serve students. By using components from the Funds of Knowledge Framework, I was able to conceptualize each participant's university support system and resources (e.g. identified individuals, their experiential advice, skills, and knowledge) for navigating the university. Due to its inclusive nature, Moll's (1992) Funds of Knowledge Framework aided in the exploration of my research questions and it offered a lens to examine first-generation college student support systems.

Methods

Research Design and Description of the Case

This research was conducted using a case study design where an academic success course served as the single case. Within the academic success course, there were first-generation college students who were taking the course, academic advisors teaching the course, and peer mentors assisting with the course. I purposely sampled participants to ensure equal representation of all three actor types in the study. Students were mandatorily enrolled in the success course because they were on academic probation (below a 2.0 on a 4.0 GPA scale), meaning they were in danger of being dismissed from the university. It is important to note that the advisors who were teaching the course did so voluntarily on top of their other duties. The peer mentors assisting with the course were getting academic credit or a small stipend for helping with the course. The course ran for 16 weeks and met once a week for an hour. Students were expected to attend class each week and meet with their peer mentor outside of class at least six times throughout the

semester. By focusing on a specific time frame and context (e.g. the semester first-generation college students are enrolled in the academic success course), I was able to more accurately generate a description of the phenomena from the data (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). A quality case study needs to focus on a particular program or situation, have rich description of the phenomena being studied, and foster the researcher's understanding of that specific phenomena (Merriam, 1998).

The specific program I focused on for this case study was the academic success course. It serves as an ideal context because it is a formal structure aimed to help students improve their academic standing. Students are automatically enrolled in the course if they are on academic probation (Undergraduate Academic Standing, 2016). To date, researchers have neglected to study first-generation college students that are struggling academically. Instead much of the research focuses on first-generation students that are enrolled in extracurricular or graduate preparation programs (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2003; McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Pitre & Pitre, 2009). By focusing on first-generation college students that are struggling to be successful in college, I can create a more complex picture of the first-generation college student experience.

By utilizing a case study approach, I can answer how or why questions (Merriam, 1998), which fits the primary research question. Merriam's (1998) case study approach is framed from a constructivism lens that emphasizes the importance of understanding how people make meaning about their experiences. Within this case study, I am asking the academic advisors teaching the course, the peer mentors assisting with the course, and the first-generation students taking the course to reflect on how the relationship forms between academic advisors and first-generation students. These individuals are reflecting on their own past experiences to identify the key components within this relationship.

It is important to note that the information that is taught in the course represents institutional knowledge that first-generation college students can benefit from. For example, the course covers different campus resources for students to utilize (e.g. tutoring, campus health services, library resources, etc.), effective study and test tasking skills, and strategies for navigating the university system. This information can be especially impactful for first-generation college students as they are often unaware of the skills and resources that are available to them in a higher education setting.

Participants

Three groups of participants were selected to participate including the first-generation college students taking the academic success course, the peer mentors assisting with the course, and the academic advisors teaching the course. Each subsample was obtained through purposive selection, a recommendation by Maxwell (2013) for researchers who aren't looking to generalize their findings but instead are targeting a specific population. For recruitment, I approached all the advisors who taught the success course, informed them about the research I wanted to conduct using their course as a case study, and asked them if they would be comfortable allowing me to interview the peer mentors, and first-generation students who volunteered to participate. Once I received their approval, I attended each section of the academic success course and recruited students in-person by presenting my research questions, goals, and defining what a first-generation college student is. I provided my contact information, phone number and email, on a slip of paper and handed it out to all the students. To recruit the peer mentors, I attended one of their weekly meetings, presented my research questions and goals, and handed out my contact information on a slip of paper. All interested participants contacted me via email and I followed up to schedule an interview.

A total of three advisors, four peer mentors, and three first-generation college students taking the course participated in the study. See Table 1 for a list of pseudonyms of the participants, their role in the study, and their length of experience in that role.

Table 1
Participant Pseudonym, Role, and Length of Experience

Pseudonym	Role	Length of Experience in Role
Jose	Peer Mentor	Returning Peer Mentor
Robert	Peer Mentor	Returning Peer Mentor
Maria	Peer Mentor	First-time Peer Mentor
Cristina	Peer Mentor	First-time Peer Mentor
Stephanie	Advisor	11 years
Daniel	Advisor	4 months
Monica	Advisor	3 years
Hannah	First-Generation Student	2 nd semester freshmen
Elizabeth	First-Generation Student	2 nd semester sophomore
Ricardo	First-Generation Student	2 nd semester transfer

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data were collected approximately half-way through the 16-week academic success course and participants were individually interviewed once with all interviews being conducted within a three-week period. These interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes with the researcher utilizing an in-depth, semi-structured protocol to gain insights on the guiding research question (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). All interviews were guided by a common set of open-ended questions that were developed using the Funds of Knowledge conceptual framework.

Each participant was asked demographic questions for context on their roles in the success course: why did you decide to become a peer mentor for the success course?; why did you decide to become an academic advisor?; what is your major?; what is your career goal?; what is your class standing? Additionally, participants were asked to share their opinions on the case study, the success course. Some example questions include: what do you think is the overall

goal of the course?; what do you perceive to be the most value aspects of the course?; and how do you see your role as a peer mentor/as the instructor of the course? Participants were also asked to identify their support networks and the support networks of students taking the course: what support do you provide the students in the success course?; what does a mentor/mentee relationship look like to you?; do you currently have a relationship that fits your description?; in what ways, do you see the instructor/peer mentor being a resource for your academic, career or personal goals? Lastly, first-generation college students were asked situational questions to have them respond to a crisis in real time and disclose who they seek assistance from when they face a potential barrier in their educational goals. An example of a situational question was: if one or more of your scholarships were in jeopardy because you were in danger of failing a class which would affect your GPA, what would you do? who would you talk to? I probed the participants when clarification was needed which allowed participants to disclose as much information as they are comfortable with related to the topic. The interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim.

Epistemology

This case study was grounded in Merriam's (1998) case study design and viewed through a constructivism lens. Merriam (1998) defines case studies as a specific situation with specific boundaries, in this case the academic success course, and emphasizes the importance of participants making meaning of their experiences and knowledge. Constructivists argue that knowledge and reality are constructed socially by individuals, their experiences, and how they interact with the world around them (Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 1998). For example, two individuals can participate in the same engineering internship over the summer but have very different experiences (e.g. for one student the internship could serve as an avenue to further

develop their problem-solving skills and for the other the deciding factor for switching their career path). Constructivists believe that knowledge is neither completely objective or subjective, but instead a combination of the two (Crotty, 1998). Through this combination, constructivists address the fact that external stimuli exist within our world, but that meaning is constructed within the interaction between the environment and individuals (Crotty, 1998).

Positionality Statement

It is important I discuss my professional and personal expertise and address any possible biases that may become evident in this study (Maxwell, 2013). I am a first-generation college student and my personal experiences have shaped my motivation for pursuing this research topic. During my time at the university, I felt overwhelmed navigating the system. I didn't understand the importance of professional development or getting involved with student organizations. I wasn't sure who to talk to about my interests in graduate school or getting a campus job. It wasn't until I met a few influential faculty and staff that I started to understand how to make myself a competitive individual in the job market. A few faculty members saw potential in me and became my mentors. Because of my personal experience, I am vulnerable to researcher bias. As Maxwell (2013) states, I can't eliminate my bias, but I need to explicitly address its existence within my research.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Funds of Knowledge conceptual framework as guide for theoretical coding. Specifically, I looked at the individuals participants identified as providing support to the first-generation college students, the types of support these individuals provided, and the key factors that participants identified for developing a relationship with these individuals. I used constant comparative analysis to compare collected data to data to identify the

common categories and overarching themes (Merriam, 1998). I also engaged in open-coding to see what emerged from the data outside of the scope of my framework (Merriam, 1998). Some examples of open codes were: opening up by finding common ground, feeling connected to their advisor, and willingness to refer to students to university resources. Throughout the analysis process, I created memos of my thoughts and reactions in relation to the data. As the researcher acts as the instrument in qualitative research, it was important to record all thought processes and questions that arose as I conducted data analysis. Analytical memoing allows a researcher to document their thought process when interacting with the data (Saldana, 2016).

Trustworthiness

To address trustworthiness in my study, I employed four criteria that Tracy (2010) recognizes as important for a quality qualitative study including: rich rigor, worthy topic, sincerity, credibility. Rich rigor was addressed through data collected from in-depth interviews and the inclusion of participant quotes in my findings to achieve a rich, thick description of the phenomenon. Tracy (2010) describes a worthy topic as one that is relevant, timely, and significant for exploration. My research topic meets this criterion because it is relevant to higher education and academic advising and advising is an emerging profession with little research on this topic (Beatty, 1991; Grites & Gordon, 2009). Sincerity is described as considering my own bias and reducing it as much as possible (Tracy, 2010), which I addressed by disclosing my positionality as it relates to my research. Credibility involves member checking (Tracy, 2010), which I implemented in my study to ensure each participant's meaning making and truth were accurately portrayed. In addition to these four criteria, I also triangulated my data by interviewing participants within the three different roles (advisors, peer mentors, and first-

generation college students) to ensure that I was capturing all facets of the case and incorporating various perspectives on the phenomenon.

Limitations

One of the limitations of the study was the number of first-generation college student participants. Although the case involves three groups of participants (advisors, peer mentors, and first-generation college students), first-generation college students were at the center of the case. It proved particularly hard to recruit first-generation college students for multiple reasons. First, students need to self-identify as a first-generation college student. During the interview, I asked all first-generation college students how they came to know they were first-generation and two out of the three said they learned the term through my in-class presentation where I recruited students. During the presentation, I defined a first-generation college student and they decided to participant, because they qualified. Another barrier to recruiting first-generation college students was confusion about the term. In the literature, there still isn't a universally accepted definition for first-generation college student. It is up to each researcher to define it for their own study. This confusion can have students self-select out of participating. One of the three first-generation students wasn't going to participant, because they didn't think they were a first-generation college student. They had an aunt who received her bachelor's, but their parents didn't attend higher education. She decided to participant, because I came into the class and defined a first-generation college student as a student with neither parent obtaining a 4-year degree from a university in the United States.

Another limitation of the study was not interviewing faculty to see how they are contributing and developing relationships with first-generation college students. The success course does have a few lessons where faculty were invited to guest lecture about themselves,

their journey and the importance of developing relationships with students. Unfortunately, faculty are not involved in the development or teaching of the course. Faculty also serve a role in mentoring students where they can be an instrumental component to a student's support system. It is important to critically look at the course and ask if faculty should have a role to help students develop the skills they need to initiate relationships with faculty. These skills are important for students' career goals, because faculty are often asked to write letters of recommendation or serve as reference for scholarships, academic and graduate school applications and programs.

Findings

Two overarching themes emerged during data analysis. In both themes, all three participant roles (first-generation college students, peer mentors, and academic advisors teaching the success course) were represented. The overarching themes were: developing an emotional connection is central to mentor/mentee relationships and utilizing a holistic approach to support students. The first overarching theme addresses the main research question about how relationships form between academic advisors and first-generation students and peer mentors and first-generation students, while the second overarching theme addresses the sub questions about the type of support students receive and the impact it has for this student population. Finally, both overarching themes are fueled by an underlying motivation to give back, which was present in both advisors and peer mentors.

Theme 1: Developing an Emotional Connection is Central to Mentor/Mentee Relationships

All participants identified the importance of establishing an emotional connection towards building a positive mentor/mentee relationship. Elizabeth, a student taking the course, identifies that without the connection, she would not value meeting with a peer mentor. "If me

and Jose didn't connect, I wouldn't feel comfortable and I'd just go to the meetings. Like can we get this over. I don't want to be here." Stephanie, an academic advisor, confirms the importance of this emotional connection by saying "[a] student knowing that you know their name makes a huge difference. Just that makes such a huge difference because this university is so huge."

Additionally, Ricardo, a student in the course, acknowledged his desire to continue meeting with his academic advisor because he feels close to her despite changing his major. "I wish I could [keep meeting with her] just because I do feel comfortable with her. I just don't know what to expect from my new [advisor]." Students want to build relationships with individuals at the university and having an emotional connection to these individuals is a critical factor in cultivating these relationships. Figure 2 depicts the factors necessary for emotional connection to develop as described by the participants. Without this emotional connection, trust cannot be developed which leads to students being less likely to ask for assistance from these individuals in the future. Each factor will be further explored under the appropriate subheadings.

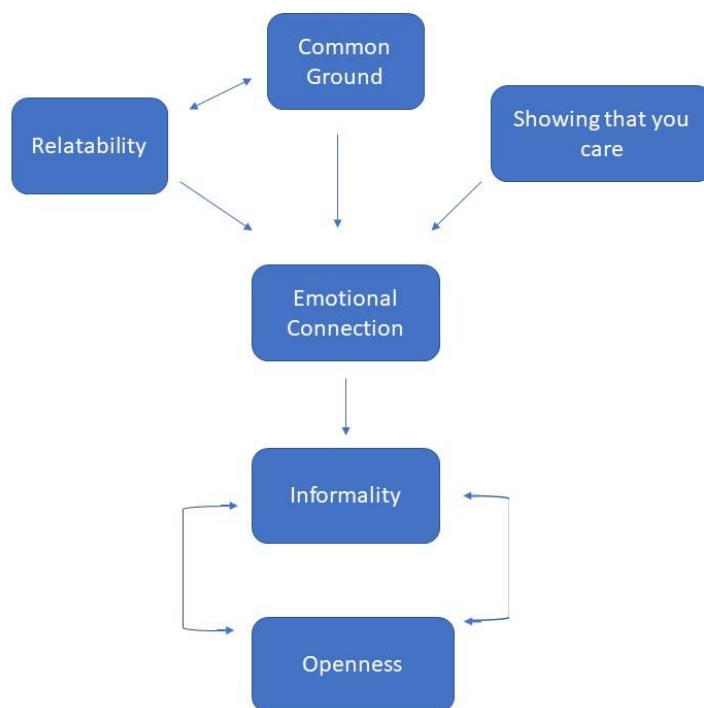


Figure 2 Process to Create Emotional Connection with Students

Common ground and relatability. Emotional connection is facilitated when advisors and/or peer mentor become relatable to students. Advisors and peer mentors establish relatability with their students by finding common ground. Common ground was defined by participants as “shared past or current experiences between individuals.” In Figure 1, the relationship between common ground and relatability is bi-directional, because they influence one another and develop together. By connecting through common ground, advisors and peer mentors become more relatable so students feel comfortable sharing details about their lives. As a peer mentor, Cristina has noticed the effect sharing personal experiences has on her relationships with students. “After telling them that I also had trouble, in the same classes. I know what it's like. Then they started loosening up [and] seeing me more as a friend instead of someone who has authority.” Monica, an academic advisor, tries to connect with students by showing them her personality. “Sometimes I make jokes in class and that’s just how I am. It could be something as silly as like relating to a song but bringing that so it cracks a smile from students.” Revealing her personality allows students to see her as an individual and they in turn feel like they can relate to her.

Stephanie, an academic advisor, also identifies the importance of having peer mentors in the program, because they can relate to students on a different level. “I think they [peer mentor] can relate to a student at a more personal level than I can. Because they are the same age, have the same kind of things going on.” Daniel, one of the peer mentors, emphasizes this point by saying “having that one-on-one with a peer I think is important. Especially a peer who has gone through stuff too or wants to pass on [their] knowledge to other students who are just starting

out.” Advisors recognized their own limitations in connecting with students. They value the peer mentor component, because they understand these students can connect with each other in a way that advisors or faculty typically cannot. Elizabeth, a student in the class, emphasizes this point by disclosing she is comfortable crying to Daniel her peer mentor. “I could definitely go to Daniel. I’d go to Daniel, cry to Daniel. After that I’d go to my advisor.” Peer mentors and advisors can work together to best support students, because they are able to build meaningful relationships in different ways. Peer mentors share their experiences and struggles which normalizes all the difficulties of navigating the university and acclimating to academia. Additionally, they reinforce the course content and refer students to the advisors and campus resources during their individual meetings.

Showing that you care. Another important component towards building an emotional connection is showing a student that you care about them. When professionals show students that they care about them outside of academia, it lowers the professional barriers and fosters trust. Stephanie, an academic advisor says, “if they [students] can figure that one person cares, I want you to be here and takes a keen interest in their lives. That’s going to keep students persisting to their goals.” Daniel, an academic advisor, echoes this sentiment by saying, “what it comes down to is human interactions and human relationships and being able to continue those and develop them.” Both advisors are emphasizing the importance of taking an interest in students. Taking moment to learn more about a student can have a profound impact on them as individuals.

Students are aware when someone at the university cares about them. Hannah, a student in the course, shares how she knows she can reach out to Stephanie, an academic advisor. “She’s always trying to help me. I know she’s there, so I can just go to her and ask about stuff.” As a peer mentor, Cristina feels like she “can go to Stephanie and Sarah. There's been so many times

where I've just walked into their office and just been like, I don't know what to do.” The advisors’ willingness to help extends to the peer mentors. They are willing take time out of their day to answer both student and peer mentor questions. Relatability, common ground, and caring all lead to an emotional connection which all three roles identified as important towards building a meaningful relationship with students.

Without that emotional connection, students interact differently with professionals. Students become more hesitant and are less likely to ask for assistance. Elizabeth, a student taking the course, demonstrates this hesitation when interacting with faculty, which is a sharp contrast to her interactions with advisors and peer mentors. She understands that “having a relationship with your professor is beneficial for class,” but she doesn’t “feel comfortable going out of [her] way to talk to them.” She wants to “actually sit down with them to get to know them and gain that trust.” Elizabeth describes how interacting with faculty in a rushed office hour setting can create a barrier towards getting to know them as people. Ricardo, a student taking the course, also addresses this hesitation. He says “as far as instructors, you had to approach me before I approached you. I’ll probably let myself drown before I can say anything.” These students understand that they need help from faculty at some point, but still have this hesitation towards approaching faculty. This may be explained by the professional barriers of faculty interactions that do not always foster an emotional connection between instructor and student. This emotional connection is not appropriate or necessary for all interactions at the university, but it is necessary for professionals who serve in mentorship roles. This extends to many faculty who have mentoring students within their academic field as a part of their professional duties.

Creating openness and informality within these relationships. Once an emotional connection is established, a relationship between students and academic advisors begins to form.

As this relationship develops, an openness and informal element to the relationship also begins to develop. This element of informality removes the professional barriers that students may experience when interacting with university professionals. For example, the first-generation college students need to meet with their advisors each semester they are on academic probation, which adds structure to that meeting as opposed to a student visiting an advisor to ask for career or internship advice. Seeking advice from an advisor has an informal element, because students are seeking guidance, whereas a meeting to evaluate a student's academic progress is task orientated. Daniel, an academic advisor, highlights this point by saying "I think informal [relationships] can be very effective, sometimes more effective than a formal structure. My relationship with my mentor informally developed and we have a close bond." Ricardo, a first-generation college student taking the course, demonstrates the danger of not having this openness in a relationship. "You had to approach me before I approached you. I'll let myself drown before I speak up." Without this openness, students are afraid to ask for assistance or be proactive about addressing their concerns. Instead it takes a crisis to motivate them to ask for help, and during crisis there are often limited options and time left in the semester to explore solutions.

Theme 2: Utilizing a Holistic Approach to Support Students

The second overarching theme that emerged from the data was the support students received through their relationships with the peer mentor, advisor, or both peer mentors and advisors. This theme centered around a holistic approach to supporting students within academia. Within this approach, additional subthemes surfaced that related to support: peer mentors and advisors initiating accountability, intentionally referring students to resources, and the underlying motivation to give back to students.

Peer mentors and advisors were intentional about how they interacted with students. They understand that their role requires them to use a holistic approach. For the participants in this study, a holistic approach was described as “looking at the student as an individual who have personal, financial, and social lives outside of academia.” By supporting students using a holistic approach, peer mentors and advisors can gauge a student’s overall well-being. Elizabeth, a student taking the course, compares how she feels about the academic advisor teaching the success course versus her major advisor. “So I had my [major] advisor first, but it was a regular advisor meeting. When I met with Stephanie, it wasn’t like that. I felt comfortable. The fact that she really wanted to get to know me.” Taking the time to learn more about the student’s motivation to pursue the vet sciences degree made a huge impact and allowed the student to feel cared about. Stephanie approached her advising appointment differently, because she asked about Elizabeth’s interests and motivations for her career path. She wanted to learn more about Elizabeth which made a big impact. Elizabeth said, “If I have a question and my dad can’t help me, I go to Stephanie. She’s my second resource.”

Additionally, Daniel and Monica, academic advisors, consider their students’ personal lives and how it interacts with their academic lives. Monica understands students have different resources available to them. “Some people don’t understand that it’s not as easy as one, two, three. Not everybody comes from a home that has money or the proper resources.” Monica is strategic when meeting with her students and asks about students’ background and family before making assumptions about their support systems and knowledge about higher education. Daniel points out that “students are trying to reach out, but things happen or they are going through stuff that prevents them from following through with commitments.” Both advisors are trying to

understand a student's whole life: academic, personal, emotional, etc. They recognize that a student's personal obligations don't end when they begin college.

Peer mentors and advisors initiating accountability. Accountability was a support that was identified by peer mentors, advisors, and students taking the success course. The students taking the course valued and expected this service in their relationships. When asked what your ideal mentor mentee relationship looks like, each student described accountability. Hannah, a student taking the course, connects it to her academic motivation. "I know it's not their [mentor] fault if I don't do my work or something. It's good to have someone to help you stay on track." Elizabeth, a student taking the course, talks about her peer mentor's guidance as positive. "Having Jose as my peer mentor made it 10 times easier. If I didn't know something from class, he'd email it to me. So, I have no choice but to get it done." Ricardo, another student taking the course, also desired accountability from others in the mentor role. "I mean I'm not looking for a babysitter, but it would find it helpful because sometimes I do forget with my kind of schedule." This accountability motivated them to continue and facilitated them getting closer to accomplishing their academic goals.

The peer mentors and advisors in the success course understood that accountability was a critical factor to support their students' success, so they provided accountability to meet their students' needs. The academic advisors thought about accountability within the context establishing relationships. One of the academic advisors, Stephanie, connects accountability to establishing trust. "When you say you are going to get back to them [students], you get back to them. Again, establishing that trust." Another academic advisor, Monica, talks about "taking the initiative to reach out to students or checking in here and there." As an academic advisor she initiates this interaction with students as a way of making sure they receive the help they may

need. They identify accountability as part of their roles as academic advisors and use it to start building relationships with students.

Peer mentors also see accountability as a part of their roles, but they link accountability to the class assignments. Cristina, a peer mentor, said “so usually I would go over like what assignments are coming up in the class and if there's anything I could help them regarding that class.” Jose, a peer mentor, describes how he reminds students about class content in hopes of them using the information to change their behavior. “[We] move onto the topic of the week in the class. So if we were talking about email etiquette that week, kind of elaborate on that and say, like in your emails I noticed that you just go straight into the body, which is fine with me, but maybe with the professor don't do that.” They want to remind the students about content and class assignments to ensure they do well in the course. They see their role as helping students through this semester experience as opposed to advisors who are looking to establish connections with students for a longer term. For example, Daniel, an academic advisor, talks about being “that person who anchors a student to campus [so they] are more likely to stay.” Because these two groups understand their roles in supporting students differently they provide accountability in different ways. It is also important to note, although all three participant groups valued this accountability, only the peer mentors or advisors initiated it. Students only initiated when they were in a crisis, for example, in danger of losing a scholarship or failing a class.

Intentionally referring students to resources. Peer mentors and advisors understand that they are not the experts on all the different components at the university. They do not perceive their role as being everything for every student, but instead connecting them to the experts. Jose, a peer mentor, summarizes this well. “I can't be everything. I can't be campus health advising or psychological services, but I can link people to those resources and that is how

I see my role.” Stephanie, one of the advisors, highlights the danger of taking on that role. “I can give them resources, but there are so many different caveats to financial aid. I would hate to misadvise them.” The advisors and peer mentors recognize their own limitations to advising students.

Although these individuals understand that they cannot be everything for a student, what sets them apart from other professionals who refer students to campus resources is their intention behind the action and how it is executed in practice. Advisors and peer mentors see power in referring students to the experts, but they do it intentionally and with purpose. Jose, one of the peer mentors, shared this insight, “[students are] navigating a system that is not necessarily designed to be easy,” Robert, another peer mentor, explains why he takes extra care when referring students. “I don't like to be that person to refer you to somebody else. Me saying I'll help you find out instead of let me refer you shows that this dude actually cares.” The implications for referring a student to another office or individual can have a lasting impact on their experience. The peer mentors and advisors are trying to avoid a negative experience for the student. They are able to gauge how much they can help the student, while also admitting when they need to seek additional help from other experts.

When a student didn't understand they needed to see their advisor, Robert, a peer mentor, took the time to help the student sign-up for an appointment. “I showed him. I was like, let's just sit down. He just pulled out his phone and like it was easy. I was like, you pull out your laptop or your phone and it will show the same.” Stephanie, one of the advisors, also took the time to help a student connect to campus resources versus simply providing them with the contact information. “Instead of me telling them to go to financial aid I've made phone calls right here. They won't talk to me, but I can pass the phone to the student. At least I'm establishing that

contact for them where as they are just trying to navigate the system themselves.” These individuals acknowledge the fact that the system is difficult to navigate and use this understanding to act in ways that ensure the student will receive the appropriate help from the correct sources.

Utilizing a holistic approach, initiating accountability, and intentionally referring students to campus resources were all identified by students, peer mentors, and advisors as important components of the mentor/mentee relationship. Additionally, they are closely related to the reason advisors and peer mentors exist. Traditionally, these types of support have been provided by individuals serving in these student-centered roles.

The Underlying Motivation for Advisors and Peer Mentors to Give Back

Interestingly, the primary motivator for themes 1 and 2 for the advisors and peer mentors was an underlying motivation to give back. All peer mentors and advisors identified that they served in these advisement roles because they were intrinsically motivated by their desire to help students. This motivation was primarily driven by past experiences. Monica, an academic advisor, had a past mentor that drove her desire to enter the profession. “She kept pushing me. She saw I could succeed. That contributed to my wanting to be an advisor.” Daniel, another advisor, also shared about an influential mentor who “helped me discovered myself in a lot of ways, they went above and beyond.” Robert, one of the peer mentors, shares that he was in the academic probation class himself in a previous semester and decided to become a peer mentor to help others like himself. Another peer mentor, Maria wanted to “pay it forward because [she] had that mentor and now [she] wanted to mentor others.” Some were motivated by the lack of support they received during their first year. Jose had a hectic first semester. “I was in my advisor's office every two weeks. My lack of support [and] what I'm interested in studying

[contributed] to my becoming a peer mentor.” Cristina, another peer mentor, had “a really hard transition because [she] didn't know what to expect from college. [She] knew it would be really rewarding to be that person in someone's life.” Although these past experiences were sometimes negative, they still contributed to the motivation to help students by giving back. This intrinsic desire to help others may explain their forethought in trying to connect with students on a personal level and providing services that would ensure student academic success and well-being.

Discussion

Interestingly, the Funds of Knowledge framework validated different types of support, exchange of knowledge, experiential advice, transferable skills, and emotional connection, but the types of support most often identified by the participants in this case study were emotional connection and exchange of knowledge. The findings revealed that peer mentors, advisors, and students all identified that relatability, common ground, and showing a student that you cared for them as an individual were the necessary components needed to develop an emotional connection which led to a positive mentoring relationship. Emotional connection fosters openness and adds an informality element which helps strengthen and sustain a positive mentor/mentee relationship. The advisors and peer mentors were intentional about creating this emotional connection because they took the time to share common ground with students to become relatable with the hope that students will in turn feel more comfortable disclosing important aspects of their lives. As noted in the findings, this relationship building is being initiated by the peer mentors and advisors. Although it is being initiated by the mentors not the mentees, students also valued developing an emotional connection. These findings are consistent with past research conducted on academic advising. Winston & Sandor (1984) found that

undergraduate students wanted to develop a relationship with their academic advisor. Students look to build this relationship, so they can make decisions about careers and professional development (Winston & Sandor, 1984). In Fielstein's (1989) study, students valued having an advisor who personally acquainted themselves with their students and wanted their advisor to know them as individuals not just as a student.

Although students are looking for this emotional connection, they are also looking for advisors to serve in informational roles and provide important academic services (Fieldstein, 1989; Smith & Allen, 2006; Winston & Sandor, 1984). Research has shown that students see their advisors as assets to their education so they seek their help. There are two different advising approaches found in most advising literature: prescriptive and developmental. Prescriptive advising refers to the traditional advising model where the advisor gives mostly information to the student and is seen as the authority in the relationship (Crookston, 1972). Developmental advising refers to a partnership with the student where the advisor and student work together to tackle problems (Crookston, 1972). Students in this study wanted advisors to provide services using an integration of both advising approaches. It is important to note that students prioritize knowledgeable advisors who share important academic information (e.g. graduation requirements, course selection, etc.) over advisors who solely provide emotional support (Fieldstein, 1989; Smith & Allen, 2006; Winston & Sandor, 1984). This prioritization could explain why some of the students I interviewed identified that they valued an advisor who cared for them as individuals but were still uncomfortable seeking help from them unless in crisis. Students tend to see advisor roles as purely informational and therefore seek guidance and advice from other individuals. Because first-generation students have the additional task of learning roles of individuals at the university, it is important to communicate to this student population

the various services that advisors and peer mentors can provide before they are in crisis mode. As seen in the data, first-student generation college students only initiated help from these relationships when in crisis.

Academic advisors are in a unique role, because they are the designated university professionals who students are required to engage with throughout their higher education career (Academic Advising, 2003). It is within an academic advisor's responsibilities to give students the permission to take upper division units and approve students for graduation (Academic Advising, 2003). In this role, they serve a crucial component in higher education, because they can have consistent interaction with students. They are integrated into the student's academic life in various ways including career exploration services, providing information, problem solving, emotional support, and university service referrals. Although students have an assigned academic advisor dependent upon his or her major, the conversations they have with students regarding wellbeing, career path, and extracurriculars adds an informal element to the meetings advisors have with students. This element of informality can make these relationships longer lasting. Informal mentorships can last 3 to 6 years, while formal relationships generally last 6 months to 1 year (Kram, 1985; Murray, 1991). By offering these various services, knowledge and types of conversations, academic advisors can become a fund of knowledge for students.

I decided to use Moll's (1992) Funds of Knowledge as the theoretical framework, because it has an inclusive nature which would allow me to map out the support that advisors provide to students in my case study and understand how this relationship can become bi-directional. Additionally, this conceptual framework approaches knowledge from the perspective that no student starts at a deficit because of a lack of knowledge or experience, but instead

validates the support these students do receive and recognizes that all individuals have transferable skills and/or valuable expertise (Moll et al., 1992).

Moving forward we need to consider in what ways faculty can serve as a fund of knowledge within a first-generation college student's support system. As previously stated faculty play an important role in students' psychosocial and academic outcomes (Komarraju, Musulkin, Bhattacharya, 2010) and serve important mentorship roles for students' development (Kim & Sax, 2009; Strauss & Terenzini, 2007; Thompson, 2001). Although the advisors and peer mentors understood the important role faculty play and recommended that the first-generation college students develop relationships with these individuals, faculty were not involved in the planning or teaching of the course. Faculty are invited to guest lecture to encourage students to develop these relationships, but that was the extent of their involvement. The first-generation college students expressed a hesitation towards interacting with faculty unless in crisis. This hesitation could be lessened by recruiting faculty to assist with the course. The academic success course is not able to provide holistic support if faculty are not able to contribute. By involving faculty, students can begin developing the skills necessary to successfully develop relationships with these key professionals. The academic success course could serve as an opportunity for students to develop an understanding of campus resources, study/learning strategies, and the appropriate way to connect with university professionals including faculty, staff, and peers.

While all advisors and peer mentors offered support to students by holding them accountable and taking a holistic approach to mentorship, they also recognized that they are not the experts for all the circumstances students may face in higher education (Academic Advising, 2003). By recognizing that others may be better equipped to handle certain situations, these

individuals take the time to connect students to different university services (Academic Advising, 2003). This goes beyond simply giving them a referral, but instead was demonstrated by taking the time to connect them to the appropriate resources during advising. Advisors and peer mentors understand that if a student has a negative experience they are less likely to use that university resource again. By taking the extra time to ensure they have a positive experience they are once again demonstrating that they care about the student which further develops trust.

Advising a student holistically aligns with the student desire for advisors to get to know them as individuals (Fieldstein, 1989; Smith & Allen, 2006; Winston & Sandor, 1984). Advisors and peer mentors identified the importance of developing a relationship with students by taking the initiative in supporting student needs (e.g. providing students accountability and connecting them to university experts) and trying to connect with students (e.g. finding common ground and becoming relatable to students). The peer mentors and advisors were driven to provide this service because they were intrinsically motivated to help students. This desire to give back could explain why these individuals are intentional in the way that they interact with students. For example, the advisors want to help students, so they try to connect with students by sharing personal stories or are understanding when students come to them with personal or financial problems.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

Directors of Student Support Services or Advising and administrators with responsibilities towards student retention should carefully examine whose role it is within the university system to provide emotional support, with consideration that this task is most effectively taken on by multiple individuals. If emotional support is only provided by a select few in advising roles there is a risk of burnout (Murray, 1987). It is also important for these key

individuals to consider if university professionals providing these services are given the time necessary to develop these relationships and if they are being compensated or recognized for their contribution in these roles. Within this case study, we see that these academic advisors have chosen to develop relationships with students that foster emotional connection because of their own desire to give back. The advisors shared that they participate in the course voluntarily in addition to their other professional duties. Advisors already serve in various other university roles and often have a large case load of students they are responsible for advising. To develop the type of relationship that all three groups of participants deem effective, it takes a considerable amount of time and effort for the advisors. It is recommended that if this type of relationship is deemed important by higher education institutions, that the resources and time necessary to develop these relationships is a part of the job description and expectations of advisors and that they are supported in this effort by their supervisors.

To further support compensating and recognizing advisors for developing these emotional connections with students, university administrators should consider centralizing advising across the institution. By centralizing advising, directors of advising can begin to define the roles of advisors at an institutional level and implement a formal evaluation procedure for all advisors. At the case study institution, there is a process in place for students to evaluate faculty. If advising is seen as central to student retention, there should be an opportunity for students to evaluate their advisors to identify and ensure best practices. Defining the roles of advisors and faculty is proving especially important as first-generation college students are a growing population in higher education. These students will be seeking information, advice, and emotional support to successfully transition to college and graduate from the institution.

In addition to outlining responsibilities of advisors and faculty in regard to mentoring students, higher education administrators need to start identifying and requiring trainings that would give advisors, faculty, and student services support staff the tools and knowledge needed to successfully establish these emotional connections with students and create lasting mentor/mentee relationships. Informal mentorship happens often when a student identifies they share something in common with a staff or faculty member, but students are not always successful in initiating conversations to facilitate this relationship. Training could include recognizing the signs that a student desires an emotional connection and strategies for initiation and facilitation.

Recommendations for future research include additional studies using the Funds of Knowledge Framework (Moll et al., 1992) for first-generation college students. Students, peer mentors, and advisors at other universities should be examined to see if the findings from this group of participants is similar to other institutions. Additionally, I recommend interviewing faculty members to discover if they are providing similar support to students and to uncover how relationships develop within the faculty/student dynamic. In this study, students expressed a hesitation to include faculty members as a fund of knowledge, justifying further exploration. Finally, multiple academic success courses could be investigated using a multi-case study approach to see if similar themes arise or if the findings within this study are specific to first-generation college students on academic probation taking an academic success course.

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